

POSITIONING MAY 13, 1969 IN THE SOUTHEAST ASIAN MODERN

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This paper demonstrates how a politically significant Southeast Asian art-piece, Redza Piyadasa's May 13, 1969, has been diminished in importance through its curation at the National Gallery Singapore. I engage in a thorough comparison between the same work's presentations in two different contexts—its inaugural exhibition at the Manifestasi Dua Seni in Malaysia and its exhibition in the National Gallery Singapore alongside other modern Southeast Asian works. The presentation in the latter context detracts from the work's political message because the curation prioritises the work's representation of modern form. The problematic curation of May 13, 1969 is a microcosm of the larger initiative to construct an autonomous Southeast Asian canon of art—museum agents struggle to distinguish Southeast Asian artworks on Western terms.

Introduction

In an online article titled “Singapore’s New National Gallery Dubiously Rewrites Southeast Asian Art History”, *Hyperallergic* art critic Bharti Lalwani panned the newly opened National Gallery Singapore for downplaying the influence of Western architectural design in the museum project, and for deploying “Disneyesque” theatricality to appeal to the Singaporean public.¹ According to Lalwani, the museum had been explicit about their attempt to “reflexively [(re)write]” artistic narratives to serve the Southeast Asian region, but the curatorial team seemed to support, rather than challenge existing narratives.² She criticised specifically the display of Redza Piyadasa’s *May 13, 1969* (1970), stating:

“...I was surprised to find Malaysian Modern artist Redza Piyadasa’s “May 13, 1969” dismally lit in a corner. The museum label and publication lists the wrong date Piyadasa’s piece was originally made—1969 instead of 1970. An honest mistake, but this is an art-historically significant work that some scholars argue may well be the first piece of installation art ever made in the region... ... the work is so poorly presented without *any* socio-political context, that I am left feeling embarrassed for the institution that has

assumed the authority to establish the regional canon.”³

Her bases for criticising the National Gallery Singapore resonated in later social media backlash against the Gallery’s second international exhibition, *Artist and Empire: (En)countering Colonial Legacies*.⁴ As indicated in the stylised title of the exhibition, the curators sought to counteract dominant colonial narratives in works which were loaned from London’s Tate Modern museum. The exhibition’s collateral fundraising event, The Empire Ball, however, appeared to be a reinforcement of decadent colonial ideals. The wealthy elite were invited to finance a cultural institution through a lavish gathering in the polished City Hall Chamber.⁵ Publicity material did not suggest any critical response towards the British Empire and their consolidation of power in Southeast Asian colonies. The Gallery’s ambitious project of establishing an autonomous Southeast Asian canon was, from then on, tainted either with their perceived hypocrisy or their negligence.

It is this contentious aspect of the Gallery’s canonisation project that I will investigate in this paper, and I will do so in specific relation to the

¹ Bharti Lalwani, “Singapore’s New National Gallery Dubiously Rewrites Southeast Asian History,” *Hyperallergic*, last modified February 1, 2016, <http://hyperallergic.com/271919/singapores-new-national-gallery-dubiously-rewrites-southeast-asian-art-history/>.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ “National Gallery drops ‘empire’ theme for its gala,” accessed November 20, 2016, <http://www.straitstimes.com/lifestyle/national-gallery-singapore-drops-empire-theme-for-its-gala>.

⁵ “National Gallery Singapore named fundraising event ‘Empire Ball’, saw nothing wrong with it,” accessed November 20, 2016, <http://mothership.sg/2016/09/national-gallery-singapore-named-fundraising-event-empire-ball-saw-nothing-wrong-with-it/>.

aforementioned “art-historically significant” work by Redza Piyadasa, *May 13, 1969* (1970). Redza Piyadasa is a Malaysian art historian and artist whose work references the eponymous May 13 racial riots following the 1969 Malaysian General Election. The night’s incidents of sectarian violence are memorialised in Malaysian history as regrettable bloodbaths, and the ugliness of the riots serve as a graphic warning to neighbouring Singapore, which shares similar racial tensions between the local Chinese and Malays. Piyadasa’s sculptural artwork references, through its title, the racial riots and their impact, but it also functions as a Modern display piece in the National Gallery Singapore’s narrative of Southeast Asian art. This paper will discuss how the iconography in *May 13, 1969* interacts with the work’s presentation in the museum and the museum’s branding to produce meanings for audiences in a postcolonial context. I argue that the work’s potential to communicate internal political strife has been overshadowed by its symbolism as a Southeast Asian endeavour into Modern, and ergo Western, art forms.

Methodology

My investigation of *May 13, 1969*’s narrative role will proceed from the use of Erwin Panofsky’s iconographical method.⁶ In Panofsky’s method, he proposes a systematic, multi-level reading of aesthetic material. I will first identify the “primary or natural subject matter”⁷ in the work—the sculpture’s formal qualities, the colours, the material and the object plainly used. Then, I will connect

⁶ Erwin Panofsky, “Iconography and Iconology: An Introduction to the Study of Renaissance Art,” in *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1955).

⁷ Panofsky, “Iconography and Iconology,” 28.

these observations to “secondary or conventional subject matter”⁸, which refers to the function of these primary properties as recurring motifs in the sculpture’s particular context.⁹ I will then use these induced ideas to arrive at “intrinsic meaning or content”, which is “apprehended by ascertaining those underlying principles which reveal the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion”.¹⁰ This investigation requires knowledge of the National Gallery Singapore’s institutional ideologies, as well as the acknowledgment of musealisation, as described by Andreas Huyssen in “Escape From Amnesia: The Museum as Mass Medium”¹¹. I will compare the work’s inaugural display at the Manifestasi Dua Seni¹² exhibition in Kuala Lumpur’s Dewa Bahasa san Pustaka¹³ to demonstrate how changes in the exhibition environment affect the sculpture’s narrative.

In the evaluation of artwork outside European or North American creation, the iconographical method runs the risk of depending solely on isolated cultural vocabularies that are specific to the geographic region. This limits artistic inquiry to the purview of “authentic” or “traditional” artistic conventions, and will not give sufficient

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 28.

¹⁰ Ibid., 30.

¹¹ Andreas Huyssen, “Escape From Amnesia: The Museum as Mass Medium” in *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (Florence: Taylor and Francis Books, 1995).

¹² Manifestation of Two Arts

¹³ National Language Institute

consideration to the politics of cultural transactions between the imagined East and West. I will thus not interpret Redza Piyadasa's sculpture and its involvement in the Gallery through its associations with "pure" Malaysian or Southeast Asian traditions. Instead, I will cast my focus on a contemporary Southeast Asia that is aware of its position vis-à-vis the hegemony of Western art.

The analysis of *May 13, 1969* within the National Gallery Singapore's context will not be complete without considering the biography of Redza Piyadasa and the artistic ideologies he sought to promote. Piyadasa was himself a prominent art historian who, together with pioneer Singaporean art historian T. K. Sabapathy, defined the Nanyang Style emerging from Modern Singaporean paintings.¹⁴ According to *Pameran retrospektif pelukis-pelukis Nanyang*¹⁵, the Nanyang style was heavily influenced by material culture in Bali, and was exclusive to a group of Singaporean painters from the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts. He was heavily invested in crafting an autonomous history of Southeast Asian art, an undertaking not unlike that of the Gallery. His ideology and its organising principles would colour his personal brand as an artist, and this in turn participates in the museum's larger conversation on the artistic significance of Modern regional pieces.

The examinations in this paper are grounded on theoretical dialogue between the Western art canon and the National Gallery Singapore as the author of its own curated narrative. The analyses in

¹⁴ Redza Piyadasa, *Pameran retrospektif pelukis-pelukis Nanyang* (Kuala Lumpur: Muzium Seni Negara, 1979).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

this paper speak of the position of an anticipated audience in relation to these overarching narratives, but cannot deterministically account for the experiences of empirical audiences in their interactions with *May 13, 1969*. Such a scholarly approach would require the statistical consideration of an audience's practical habits and infinitely varied social positions across a spectrum. This approach, while admittedly valuable in the investigation of reception or identity politics, would detract from the paper's focus on the construction of narratives.

Reflection at the Manifestasi Dua Seni (1970)

May 13, 1969 welcomed audience interaction at its initial presentation at the Manifestasi Dua Seni (1970) in the Dewa Bahasa san Pustaka.¹⁶ The visual artworks at the exhibition were curated as parallel responses to local literature, and Redza Piyadasa chose the poem "Kambing Hitam (sebelum dan sesudah Mei 13)"¹⁷ by Usman Awang to accompany his sculptural piece. The poem is organised into three sections: before the racial riots, the day of the riots, and after. Each section describes, through metaphor, the sights at the given point in time. For example, in the "Mei 13" section, Usman Awang describes a poor boy in red dress¹⁸ and a red dusk¹⁹, referencing the bloody carnage in the early hours of the day. Usman Awang proclaims that democracy has died on the day of the racial

¹⁶ "Black Goat," accessed November 20, 2016, <http://imageswithoutbodies.tumblr.com/post/85564731151/black-goat>.

¹⁷ Black Goat (Before and After May 13)

¹⁸ merah baju si anak malang

¹⁹ merah senja

riots.²⁰ The poem laments the darkness of the day, articulating the suffering through visceral, tangible symbols.



Figure 1: Viewers gather around Usman Awang's poetry at the *Manifestasi Dua Seni (1970)* in the *Dewa Bahasa san Pustaka*.²¹

“Kambing Hitam (sebelum dan sesudah Mei 13)” was presented in two slabs of text on the floor next to Redza Piyadasa's *May 13, 1969*.²² The viewer is first confronted by the poetry at their feet (figure 1), and the poem sets the sombre tone for interpreting the May 13 racial riots. The poem provides sociopolitical context and thus the conceptual grounds for the sculpture to be received. In this presentation of the work in Malaysia, viewers are encountering the sculpture in the same country where the racial riots occurred a mere year ago. Usman Awang's vivid poetry recalls the memory of the riots, conjuring the parameters around the artwork to address the recent trauma. The time and location of the exhibition characterises the work's presentation as part of an urgent plea for national healing. The position of the poem beckons for the viewer to modify their gaze—viewers bow their

heads to read the poetry. Their eyes do not rest easily at the eye level because the poetry interrupts their activity and draws them into the dialogue between the poetry and Redza Piyadasa's sculpture.

The poem on the floor directs the viewer's eyes to the adjacent ground, where the mirror base for *May 13, 1969* rests. The square mirror forms a reflective perimeter around an otherwise vertical sculpture, reflecting the viewer's prodding gaze. The mirror draws the viewer's self-image into the rhetoric of the piece, such that the viewer's interaction completes the circuit of the artwork. This is the feature that distinguishes the artwork in its inaugural exhibition from its later presentation in the National Gallery Singapore. Here, the artwork more than welcomes audience interaction. It requires it. The sculpture does not provide its audience with the comfort of ambiguous signs and subtlety, such that they can achieve analytical distance from the work. The erect black coffin, painted with fragments of the Malaysian flag, is an obvious and almost vulgar reference to the death of their nation. The universal symbol for nationhood, a country's flag, has been warped and distorted around a plain black vehicle for corpses. The sculpture provokes the audience and captures their response in its own material (the mirror). In this work, the literal connects immediately to the figurative; the mirror creates space for reflection.

²⁰ demokrasi telah mangkat

²¹ “Black Goat.”

²² Ibid.



Figure 2: A 2006 reconstruction of Redza Piyadasa's *May 13, 1969*, as displayed in the UOB Southeast Asia Gallery, National Gallery Singapore²³

A Modern Southeast Asian Sculpture

The mirror that incorporated the audience at the *Manifestasi Dua Seni* now serves a different purpose in the sculpture's exhibition in the UOB Southeast Asia Gallery at the National Gallery Singapore. The sculpture occupies a space in the corner of the gallery. Black tape cordons off the area around the sculpture in a rigid square, and the distance between the tape and the mirror base of the work is just enough to prevent viewers from peering into the mirror. The square perimeter of the black tape sits at an awkward diagonal to the corner of the walls so viewers cannot comfortably walk around the work. The mirror no longer reflects the prodding faces of viewers, and this is symptomatic of the National Gallery's overbearing museal project.

Andreas Huyssen describes this phenomenon in "Escape from Amnesia: The Museum as Mass Medium"—"the museum emerged as the paradigmatic institution that collects, salvages, and preserves that which has fallen to the ravages of Modernisation. But in doing so, it inevitably will construct the past in light of the discourses of the

²³ "Singapore's New National Gallery Dubiously Rewrites Southeast Asian Art History"

present and in terms of present-day interest."²⁴ Redza Piyadasa's *May 13, 1969* has transformed into a museum artefact through its presentation at the National Gallery Singapore. The National Gallery Singapore serves the purpose of documenting developments in visual art through a linear progression. It selects, collects, and re-presents items of art as physical evidence of key moments in our present-day narrative of Southeast Asian art. The *May 13, 1969* that sits in the National Gallery is a 2006 reconstruction of the original 1970 sculpture. The physical form of the work has been resurrected to give audiences an immediate visual impression of the original *May 13, 1969*. The work, however, no longer has to operate to interact with viewers and carry out its artistic function. Now, the work is static. The area around the sculpture is cordoned off to museum-goers, because, as a physical reconstruction of an older art piece, it is important for the work to remain unmolested by the hands of the present. The National Gallery exhibition declares that the work's key moment is now over, and that it can retire within the confines of the museum walls. What then does the museum select to be *May 13, 1969*'s key moment? What is the reconstruction evidence of?

The reconstructed *May 13, 1969* is not about the post-election Malaysian racial riots. *May 13, 1969*'s museum label in the UOB Southeast Asia Gallery space does not provide information on the work's incendiary sociopolitical context. Divorced from its context, the work cannot be received as a cynical response to critical Malaysian poetry, nor social commentary on the divisiveness in the Malaysian population. This is not to say that the museum has hidden or misconstrued the work's

²⁴ Huyssen, "Escape from Amnesia", 15.

conception—a hint of the work’s topic still resides in the title. The National Gallery has, however, in presenting a more polished and removed museum front, shifted the focus away from the raw emotion of the May 13 events. What remains before the viewer is the physical shell of the former *May 13, 1969*. This shell is ominous but also vague and elusive. Without the work’s context, the work’s significance lies primarily in its form.

In the UOB Southeast Asia Gallery, the upright coffin is a provocative symbol of death, but it is also a salient example of the use of readymades. The work appropriates a coffin, an otherwise functional object in a different set of rituals, and transforms it into a work of Modern art. The coffin maintains its recognisable physical shape. The work also appropriates a mirror for its reflective properties. These elements of the sculpture finds its predecessor in Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain* (1917)²⁵ in the Western canon, where a urinal was appropriated and stuck upside down to be transformed into a controversial art piece. In *May 13, 1969*, the distorted and fragmented Malaysian flag is painted on with cheap acrylics, and one can make out the dry woodgrain of the coffin underneath the thin layers of white. The material of the sculpture does not disguise itself. It does not seek mimesis in the portrayal of something external to itself. Clement Greenberg writes in his essay on Modernist painting that “Realistic, naturalistic art had dissembled the medium, using art to conceal art; Modernism used art to call attention to art.”²⁶

²⁵ “Marcel Duchamp,” accessed November 20, 2016, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/duchamp-fountain-to7573>.

²⁶ Clement Greenberg, *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian, vol. 4 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 86.

May 13, 1969’s formal properties visibly fit this description of Modernism, and thus the sculpture is a suitable candidate for demonstrating Southeast Asian efforts in Modern ways of art-making.

The National Gallery Singapore seeks to preserve and document *May 13, 1969* as a significant step towards Modern sculptural installations in the region. The work’s reference to the 1969 Malaysian racial riots is only secondary, and is overshadowed by the sculpture’s formal contributions to the present-day discourse on locating contemporary artwork in Southeast Asia. The National Gallery Singapore is a large commercial venture that describes itself as the overseer of the “largest public collection of Modern art in Singapore and in Southeast Asia.”²⁷ It is positioned at the forefront of art institutions in Singapore, and seeks to centre Singapore as an “international hub”²⁸ for the visual arts. The museum’s ambitious institutional mission would inevitably colour its treatment of individual art pieces. The inclusion of Modern-looking pieces in the museum’s collection demonstrates that Southeast Asia is participating in current and international discourse on art, and that it is not merely preoccupied with “low”, “traditional” forms of visual culture.

Redza Piyadasa and the Southeast Asian Modern

James Elkins determines in “Why Is It Not Possible to Write Art Histories of Non-Western Cultures?” that crafting a Southeast Asian art canon is impossible without resulting in “Western narratives that serve Western purposes and are

²⁷ “About the Gallery,” accessed November 20, 2016, <http://nationalgallery.sg/about/about-the-gallery/>.

²⁸ Ibid.

supported by Western ideas.”²⁹ It is indeed difficult to shine a spotlight on an important Malaysian sculpture without hailing Greenbergian ideas of Modernism and other Western academic art terms. According to James Elkins, periodisations and other principles of organisation in art history are irrevocably Western.³⁰

Redza Piyadasa analysed Southeast Asian artwork and sought to create a space for these works in academic discourse, but he too did so by, inevitably, using established Western art terms. In Redza Piyadasa’s definition of the Nanyang Style, a unique, Southeast Asian style of painting emerged from a combination of Chinese landscape painting and Post-Impressionist techniques.³¹ In Piyadasa’s writing on Southeast Asian “decorative impulses”, he describes how Western high art had established a tyranny over the art world and had dismissed the importance of Eastern “crafts”.³² He writes that the latter has however seen a revival following postmodern resistance to the myth of the “genius artist”, and then goes on to describe the unique formal quality of artisanal crafts in Balinese painting and Malay jewelry.³³ In both instances, though he

²⁹ James Elkins, “Why Is It Not Possible to Write Art Histories of Non-Western Cultures?” in *The Past in the Present: Contemporary Art and Art History’s Myths* (Bratislava: Nadacia Centrum Sucasneho Umenia, 2002), 243.

³⁰ Elkins, “Why Is It Not Possible to Write Art Histories of Non-Western Cultures?,” 244.

³¹ “The Nanyang Style,” accessed November 20, 2016, http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1626_2009-12-31.html.

³² Redza Piyadasa, “S-E Asia’s decorative impulses.”

³³ *Ibid.*

has articulated the importance of Eastern styles, he has not created a new vocabulary for non-Western discussion.

This is not to suggest that the creation of a non-Western art canon is inherently impossible (as Elkins would have believed), or that any use of Western art terms is reprehensible. What this suggests, however, is that Redza Piyadasa’s name as an artist is particularly susceptible to being overshadowed by Western comparisons. Like in his writing, his sculpture takes on a subject that is close to home in Malaysia, but it takes on a defiant form that is recognised as Western. This causes the work’s meaning to teeter between the East and the West, internal political strife and the external art world, and finally, the work’s curation in the *Manifestasi Dua Seni* and in the UOB Southeast Asia Gallery tips it over in either direction.

Conclusion

The crafting of a Southeast Asian art canon involves addressing inevitable Western influences in the region. Artworks are cultural products that contain traces of a region’s history. Southeast Asia, with its colonial past, will not be able to create or discuss works that are absolutely free of Western establishments. Artistic agents in the region, such as the National Gallery Singapore or Redza Piyadasa himself, struggle to strike a balance between acknowledging the West and moving on to build an autonomous Southeast Asian future. This struggle is ever-present and inherent in the production and presentation of any object that claims an identity as Southeast Asian art. The curation of non-Western art is already a challenge, and the National Gallery Singapore’s categorisation of artwork according to Western terms of “modern” form certainly does not help the case.

May 13, 1969's presentation at two different exhibitions (Manifestasi Dua Seni and the permanent exhibition in the UOB Southeast Asia Gallery) shows how the structuring of the museum environment interacts with a work's form and content to deliver significantly different experiences. One creates a reflective space for locals to discuss a rift in the social fabric of Malaysia, and the other emphasises that Southeast Asian art has participated in Modern art. If the National Gallery Singapore lays claim as the authority of regional art, it has to abandon its project of proving itself on Western terms of modernity, and set its eyes on Southeast Asia.

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